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THE BUDDHIST MONUMENTS OF KHARTSE VALLEY, WESTERN TIBET[1]

TSHE RING RGYAL PO and CHRISTIANE PAPA-KALANTARI
In cooperation with CHRISTIAN JAHODA

The prophesy of the Sage (Śākyamuni) is announced in many sūtras and tantras thus: 'In seven times five hundred years from my nirvāṇa there will appear a monk with a bird-like face and he will spread my teachings'. The ancestral home of this lama was Hrugs-wer of Kha-tse in Gu-ge (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 85).

From the 10th century onwards, a large number of Buddhist temples and monasteries were founded in the area which constituted the political domain of the kings of Purang Guge (Pu rang Gu ge)[2] in Western Tibet (mNga' ris). Members of the royal lineages and their aristocratic allies played a vital role as patrons of Buddhism during the phase of the 'Later Diffusion of Buddhism' (*bstan pa phyi dar*) which led to the establishment of impressive intellectual and spiritual (as well as remarkable political) centres. As a consequence, a long tradition of refined and complex artistic Buddhist culture developed in Western Tibet. Major sites (such as Tholing [Tho ling], Tsaparang [rTsa rang], Dungkar [Dung dkar], etc.) have been at least partly studied in detail by various scholars (in the 1930s for example by Giuseppe Tucci and in the last two decades by Chinese, Tibetan and international scholars).

1. Khartse Valley

Since the late 1990s, various previously little or unknown sites have been explored and initially documented (see for example Huo Wei 2007). Among these new findings are those made in the Khartse

1 This paper is based on the SARU (Social Anthropology Research Unit) International Guest Lecture held by Prof. Tshe ring rgyal po under the title of "Society and Cultural History of Western Tibet (mNga' ris)" at the Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA) at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna (May 29, 2008). The authors are grateful to Eva Allinger, Thomas Kintaert, Christian Luczanits and Kurt Tropper for useful discussion and helpful comments at various stages in the preparation of this paper.

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All photography is by Tshe ring rgyal po. Maps are by Christiane Papa-Kalantari and Tshe ring rgyal po.

2 On their first occurrence in the text Tibetan proper names are rendered in parentheses in their most usual form according to the Wylie transliteration scheme. For additional variants of spellings, in particular of place names, see, for example, Vitali 1996.

1. View of Tsamda area from Khartse

3. Landscape around Khartse Village area (summer place)

(mKhar rtse)[3] Valley (see Pritzker 2000, von Schroeder 2001, Pritzker 2008). Explorations in this valley carried out by Tshe ring rgyal po since 2002 have not only brought to light the existence of further hitherto unknown Buddhist sites (see Tshe ring rgyal po 2006). They also revealed that the monuments, paintings and objects preserved there represent important examples of a wider historical Western Tibetan Buddhist tradition dating to periods between the 11th and 19th centuries. Moreover, finds of texts and artefacts or other religious items from different epochs also reflect the historical development of the various sites of importance for their Buddhist and art-historical heritage. This wider cultural and artistic perspective therefore constitutes the comparative focus of the present paper. Based on the field research conducted by Tshe ring rgyal po, this article provides a first assessment of the previously almost unknown Buddhist monuments in the Khartse Valley in terms of their historical and art historical value and presents a survey of their interior decoration guided by the aim of demonstrating their considerable potential for further research.[4] Due to the limitations of space, this presentation relates to only a very small selection from the large amount of documented material available, and for the same reason only a very limited number of aspects can be discussed here.[5]

Geographical setting

The Khartse area forms a huge longitudinal valley, enclosed by steep cliffs in the centre of Tsamda (rTswa mda') County (Figs. 1 and 2; Maps 1 and 2). This county is located in the south-east of the Ngari (mNga' ris) Prefecture, at a latitude of 30.5°–32.4°and a longitude of 78.5°–79.8° and includes one township, five villages, and fifteen administration hamlets. Its area is 24,601.59 sq. km with a population of c. 6,500 people. The southern and northern regions of the county are at higher altitudes than the centre of the county, so that it is shaped like a large basin. The average elevation is around 4,000 m.

Khartse Village lies to the south of the Sutlej (Glang chen kha 'babs) River at a latitude of 31.29° and a longitude of 79.26°. Coming from Senge Khambab (Seng ge kha 'babs) / Shiquanhe, the modern

3 Throughout the text the modern Tibetan spelling mKhar rtse is used as a convention. Older spellings, as they appear for example in *lo chen* Rin chen bzang po's hagiography, are Kha che, Kha tse, Kha rtse, Khwa tse.

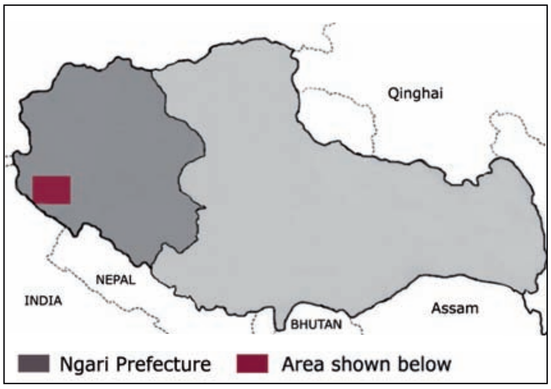
4 Other aspects in the Khartse Valley of scholarly interest which cannot be dealt with here are ancient petroglyphs, shrines of local deities as well as oral traditions related to the Buddhist and folk culture and belief systems of the local population of the area.

5 A more comprehensive and detailed study is in preparation.

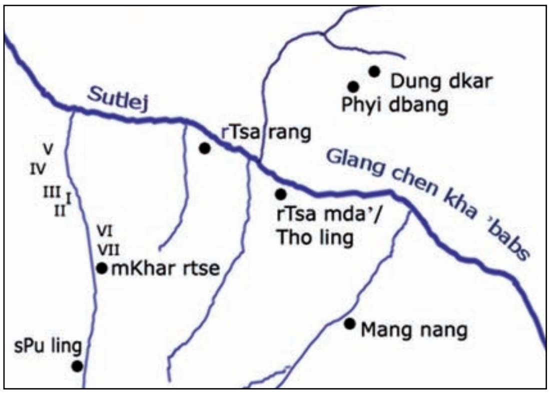
capital of Ngari Prefecture, one can reach the Khartse area (Fig. 3) today by travelling southwards to Tsamda (Tholing) and from there on a jeepable road c. 70 km distance to the west. Upstream the Sutlej River lies the well-known site of Tsaparang, the former capital of the kings of Guge. To the north-east are the equally significant early Buddhist sanctuaries of Dungkar and Phyiang (Phyi dbang).

Sites in the Khartse Valley

The Buddhist monuments of the Khartse Valley are scattered among various sites all over the area and partly cut into the cliffs of the longitudinal valley. In the lower, northern part of the valley which functions as a 'winter place' (*dgun sa*) are five major sites: (Old) Khartse Village[6] (Map 2: I) and within its residential area the Maitreya Temple (Byams pa lha khang) and Khartse Monastery (Map 2: II) housing the famous Jowo (*jo bo*) statue and other important early Buddhist sculptures (see von Schroeder 2001: 70–73). To the west of Khartse Village is the famous Nyag Cave Temple (Nyag phug pa lha khang) (Map 2: III), part of a sacred landscape to which the ruins of a monumental temple (*lha khang*), the shrine of the female protective deity (*srung ma*) known as Nyag Dorje Chenmo (rDo rje chen mo) as well as monumental stupas (*mchod rten*) also once belonged. Both the temple and the cave date back to the 11th century. Their interior programmes display strong Indic and Kashmiri artistic affinities which have been adapted to Western Tibetan iconography and aesthetic values. On the top of the hill above Khartse Village old monumental stupas from the same period have fortunately survived in an unrestored state. According to local sources, one of them houses the relics of the body of the Great Translator (*lo chen*) Rin chen bzang po (pronounced Rinchen Zangpo) (958–1055). The cave complexes known as Brag rdzong (pr. Drakdzong) (Map 2: IV) and lCang lo can (pr. Jang Lojen) (Map 2: V) lie further to the north and contain images of enormous iconographic complexity and colourful splendour displaying strong Central Tibetan affinities characteristic of the historical phases across the whole region from the 13th century onwards.



Map 1. Ngari Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region, PR China



I (Old) Khartse Village (winter place), II Khartse Monastery, III Nyag Cave, IV Brag rdzong Cave, V lCang lo can Cave, VI mKhar rdzong Cave, VII Bar rdzong Cave

Map 2. Sites in the Khartse Valley, Western Tibet

The upper southern part of the valley is a high-altitude region (4,300 m) and is the 'summer place' (*dbyar sa*) of the local population. It contains the mKhar rdzong (pr. Khardzong) (Map 2: VI) and Bar rdzong (pr. Pardzong) (Map 2: VII) cave sites. The transition between summer and winter place is marked by the seat of three female local deities (*yul lha*).

[6] This designation as 'old' reflects the fact that due to the recent translocation of the majority of the local population to New Khartse Village (in the Tsaparang area), this settlement has come to be used only infrequently.

Old Khartse Village (mKhar rtse yul dgun sa)

Old Khartse Village is the centre of the winter place (Fig. 4). The village lies stretched out on a plain in the secluded valley, with a steep cliff positioned like a curtain behind it. Among the low mudbrick buildings merging with the arid surrounding landscape, the Maitreya temple is specifically embellished and honoured by the white colour of its exterior walls.

4. Old Khartse Village

The historical importance of Khartse is already attested in the hagiography (*rnam thar*) of *lo chen* Rin chen bzang po (cited at the beginning of this article from a middle-length version). According to the extant versions of this text, the Great Translator belonged to the Hrugs wer clan which had a strong presence in the Khartse area. Its thirteen ancestral branches (*pha sgo bcu gsum*) are still part of the oral traditions of the area and live on in the aristocratic lineage of the Khartse 'king' (*rgyal po*) to this day. Rin chen bzang po's hagiography also mentions his subjugation of female local deities and demons and their subsequent appointment as guardians or protective deities of temples founded by him in the Khartse area (see below).

5. Maitreya Temple (Byams pa lha khang)

The Maitreya Temple (Figs. 5 and 6) at the centre of Old Khartse Village may perhaps have its origins in an early Buddhist temple. This assumption is also supported by an old, elaborately executed wooden portal (Fig. 7), the workmanship of which clearly belongs to the rich tradition of woodcarvings in Western Tibet and its predecessors in India. Among the latter the timber architecture of Chamba and

6. Chamber with Buddhist sculptures and thangkas, Maitreya Temple (Byams pa lha khang)

7. Detail, wooden portal with a protector deity (rNam thos sras) at the centre of the lintel

Lahoul is of special significance. While the doorframe may stem from the early Buddhist phase of the valley or slightly later (11th–13th c.), the present interior decoration is clearly from a later period, possibly dating from the 19th century.

Khartse Monastery (mKhar rtse jo bo og dkar phug dgon)[7]

Khartse is most famous for the Jowo statue, which dwells in a prayer hall of a cave complex in the cliffs (Figs. 8 and 9). It is well known throughout and beyond Western Tibet, and must have been a focus of pilgrimage since arriving in the area. According to his hagiography, Rin chen bzang po returned from one of his journeys to India with a bronze statue of Avalokiteśvara, which might possibly be associated with the present image of the Jowo in Khartse Monastery. The Buddha in its crown allows its identification as Avalokiteśvara. The bronze sculpture of the Jowo is remarkable on account of its workmanship and its size, corresponding – according to the same source – to the height of the father of Rin chen bzang po. In his hagiography we are further informed about the circumstances of the transfer of the sacred image to Khartse and about how the statue lost a finger of its right hand, which corresponds to the current state of the statue.[8]

8. View of the cliff with Khartse Monastery

[7] The name of the sanctuary contains not only a reference to the Jowo but also to wild cats (designated as "og dkar" in the local dialect) which may be explained by the fact that such cats used to reside in the caves of this area. The name Go khar, as it appears in Rin chen bzang po's hagiography (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 108), derives perhaps from this local designation.

[8] See also Pritzker (2000: 131, 133) and von Schroeder (2001: 70–71) for further examples of early Buddhist sculptures preserved in this temple.

9. The Jowo (*jo bo*) Avalokiteśvara bronze sculpture reflecting a Kashmir-style trend in the 11th century

10. Rin chen bzang po's lock on the entrance door

11. Wall painting featuring the monastery where the Jowo (*jo bo*) resides and a procession of the 'three sisters' (local tutelary deities)

A lock and a key are also said to date from the time of Rin chen bzang po, and people believe it was the private lock that he brought back from Tholing before he died (Fig. 10). The monastery's murals – painted in a rather simple local style – show an important image of the local sacred landscape, featuring the Jowo, together with depictions of three local deities (*yul lha*) who are conceived as 'sisters' and regarded as protectresses of the area (Fig. 11). The murals featuring Buddhist images are also from a rather late phase (17th/18th century?) but – in contrast to the historic depiction of the sacred landscape – they are executed in an elaborate and refined style displaying strong Chinese-style tendencies.

The Stupas (*mchod rten*)

A remarkable group of stupas is positioned on the top of the hill above Khartse close to Khartse Monastery. One of the stupas (Fig. 12) is particularly interesting, as it has survived in an evidently unrenovated state and thus provides an important document of the original 11th-century structure, providing valuable evidence for the reconstruction of the architectonic development of this type of religious monument in the region. The base of the stupa is fashioned as a three-stepped square and contains niches at the cardinal points. Above this base, which is also conceived as 'throne' (*khri*), there might be the core of a once hemispherical dome conceived as vase (*bum pa*), shrine or womb (*garbha*) on which rest the *harmikā* (the 'palace of the gods') and the upper spire; the latter is typically composed of up to thirteen umbrellas (*gdugs*). Of the crowning finial – usually crescent moon, sun disc and dissolving flame – only a wooden pillar remains, representing the central axis of the stupa and denominated as 'life-wood', or 'life-tree' (*srog shing*).

12. Medieval stupa at Khartse (note the images of deities and ornamental features in clay on the spire)

Particularly interesting are not only the specific shape of the monument but also the original decorative elements such as the figurative depictions on the zone above the cupola (*bum pa*) (perhaps representing the Four Great Kings) as well as the ornamental details executed in clay recalling ornamental pillars and also the symbolic shape of the 'ox-eye' or *gavakṣa* motif of Indian temple architecture. A stupa depicted in the Alchi Dukhang ('Du khang) has a similar characteristic shape and also displays the figures of a Buddha as well as flanking figures on the cupola. The structure of the building also recalls votive stupas from Northern Pakistan and Kashmir (cf. Zin 2003: fig. 5 on p. 407). The stupa provides important material for detailed comparative studies including this type of monument from the same artistic phase.

Ruins of the Nyag Temple (Nyag lha khang)

In the vicinity of the stupas, below the Nyag cave, are the ruins of a huge free-standing temple which is also of great importance (Figs. 13 and 14). The place name of the cave (Nyag) refers to the body of the scorpion: according to local belief, the Nyag cave sanctuary, together with a stupa erected on a nearby hill (Fig. 15), control the two pincers of the animal. It is thought that the two monuments put pressure on the body of the animal, preventing it from rising and doing harm to the temple lying between.

This impressive monument is situated on a large plain in the valley. The structure measures roughly 15 m from east to west and 7 m from south to north. The massive cube-like shape of the construction is in the tradition of Western Tibetan temple architecture with a combination of stone rubble, timber and mud bricks, adapted to the harsh climatic and seismic conditions of the region. The Tabo Main Temple (*gtsug lag khang*) shows a comparable typology and dates from the same historical phase. The ground plan of the Nyag Temple includes an entry chamber (*sgo khang*) in the east leading to the Assembly hall (*'du khang*), which has a sanctum (*dri gtsang khang*) with ambulatory (*skor lam*) in the west. The monument once contained clay sculptures which were affixed to the walls. A view of the south wall of the cella (Fig. 14) shows that very little of these deities, mainly their haloes, is still visible. The figures probably once formed a mandala configuration. This iconographic and compositional scheme characteristic of the period from the mid-11th century onwards contrasts with the monumental standing Bodhisattvas flanking the main icon in the cultic centre of Tabo which stems from an earlier, Central Tibetan-influenced phase at the end of the 10th century (Jahoda and Papa-Kalantari 2009). It is said that ten years ago some parts still had paintings, and in fact traces

13. Ruins of the monumental Nyag Temple (Nyag lha khang), view from north

14. Fragmentary remains of the internal decoration of the temple with sculptures in clay

of haloes in rainbow colours together with a few other elements are still visible. Unfortunately when parts of the remaining roof collapsed the walls started to crumble rapidly from exposure to rainwater which is gradually washing away the remainder of the paintings. Despite its precarious condition, the temple is of great importance for the study of the evolutionary history of this building type, the underlying geometry of the layout and the original construction technique.

Nyag Cave Temple (Nyag phug pa lha khang): The earliest known Buddhist cave sanctuary in the Western Himalayas and Western Tibet

The site lies at an altitude of 4,035 m and can only be reached on horseback or on foot. An image of the surrounding sacred landscape shows the hill crowned by a ruined stupa (*mchod rten*) lying on the right pincer of the scorpion, while the cave secures its left pincer (Fig. 15). In front of it is a building,

15. Sacred landscape near the Nyag cave with the stupa on the ‘scorpion’s pincer’

used by nomads as a corral for sheep and goats and also a storage-cave carved out of the rock is sited near the temple. Owing to its sheltered position in the hills, this important temple has withstood marvellously the rigours of the harsh climate and vandalism.

At the entrance the construction technique of the interior space becomes visible, consisting of mud bricks covering the walls of the whole cave, providing an even surface for the painted decoration. The original roof has not been preserved and the floor level was originally much lower (see Pritzker 2008: 103). The interior space of the cave temple is 3.7 m high and has a simple rectangular ground plan with a length of c. 7.85 m and a width of 5.7 m. The sanctum (measuring c. 4 m by 4 m) enclosed by walls of brick and a path for circumambulation is positioned at the back (western) end of the sacred space. The sculptures once inside represented the iconic centre of the sanctuary, but only their thrones now remain. The central base features two lions comparable to those at the image of Vairocana (rNam par snang mdzad) at Tabo Monastery (Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India). Thus the ensemble at the centre of devotion at Khartse may also have once represented the core deities of a Vajradhātu mandala (*rdo rje dbyings kyi dkyil ’khor*).

The importance of the chapel lies in the fact that it preserves a number of distinctive artistic and iconographic features. The north wall displays a remarkable composition of a large assembly of

monks with a teaching Buddha in the centre[9] together with a Vajradhātu mandala, while the south wall depicts a Dharmadhātuvāgīśvaramañjuśrī mandala (*chos dbyings gsung gi dbang phyug gi dkyil 'khor*).[10] The entrance wall shows an unusual ensemble of protector deities.

Multifaceted pantheon of protectors[11]

If we take a closer look at the depiction of protective deities on the entrance wall (facing to the east), large haloes on either side of the doorway indicate that they must once have been subordinated to two large, almost life-size gate-protectors (*dvārapāla*, *sgo bsrungs*) in clay (Fig. 16). This group includes the tutelary deities Pañcika/Pāñcika (lNga[s] rtsen), Gaṇapati (Tshogs [kyi] bdag [po]), Hārītī ('Phrog ma) (Abb. 17), *yakṣa* and *yakṣiṇī* (*gnod sbyin*), *nāga* and *nāginī* (*klu, klu mo*), (Fig. 18) and *kinnara*, as well as a rare type of the Four Great Kings (*rgyal chen bzhi*) – the guardians of the world (*lokapāla, 'jig rten skyong ba*) and of the four directions (*dikpāla, phyogs skyong*) – shown as similarly or uniformly garbed warriors with suits of armour and banners.

Of specific interest is a group of female deities (*yakṣiṇī*) depicted in a lower register, which has not yet been identified in other temples from this artistic phase: one of them is shown with a flower and an overflowing vase (*pūrṇakalaśa, gter gyi bum pa*), resting on two lions as *vāhana*; the vase symbolically filled to the brim is decorated with a jewel-string, pearls and streamers of textiles which are held by various genies of abundance and wealth. A second female deity to her left can be tentatively identified as Rūpavajrā (gZugs rdo rje ma) (Fig. 19): the gracious-looking deity has four hands and three eyes and is shown seated on lions as her vehicles; she wears a skirt, bodice and a scarf and she is embellished with jewellery, a diadem and a garland of flowers around her head. She holds a mirror (*darpaṇa, me long*) – indicating the faculty of sight (de Mallmann 1975: 326) – which reflects details of her face such as her eyes and mouth, while in the other hands are trident, rosary (*mālā*) and one unidentified object. It is possible that the two deities at Khartse represent a part of an iconographic ensemble, as is indicated by a comparison with a mid-12th century Jain manuscript cover from western India which features a group of female deities denominated as *vidyādevī* (cf. Guy 1994).[12] On a stylistic level, too, certain affinities are observable: characteristic stylistic features, interest in the details of costumes and jewellery,

16. Protective deities on the left-hand side of the entrance wall, organized in simple registers

[9] Below the assembly is a rectangular panel which may once have contained inscriptions and donor depictions. For unknown reasons they have unfortunately been painted over with white pigments.

[10] There is no clear symmetry in the overall pictorial programme on the level of compositional types, in contradistinction to comparable temples such as Tabo.

[11] Unfortunately only the left-hand side of the entrance is well preserved while the right-hand side is fragmentary and needs further detailed investigation to permit identification of individual elements.

[12] Characteristic of this group are deities with four arms, their mounts including wild cats, and lotus pedestals; they often hold *mālā* and weapons (trident, sword and shield); one of them holds a mirror, while the flanking deity on the manuscript holds two lotuses and is represented sitting on a wild cat, comparable to the Khartse images. There are also affinities with a female deity in the Mirkulā Devī Temple of Udaipur, representing a consort of Śiva and holding trident, rosary, mirror and fruit.

17. Protective divinity (Hārītī), entrance wall, left-hand side

18. *Nāginī* in a group of serpent spirits, right-hand side of the portal, above the halo of the gate-protector

19. *Yakṣi* (Rūpavajrā?), entrance wall, left-hand side

graphic treatment of facial elements with large, fish-shaped eyes. The static posture and frontality emphasizing the iconic, transmundane nature of the Hārītī figure (Fig. 17) also tends to preserve the memory of the Indian models, a characteristic which stands in contrast to the interest in naturalistic movement and interaction between figures in later Kashmiri-style images displaying post-Gandhāran features that are displayed in later (12th–13th century) temples at Nako and Dungkar.

A consistent feature is the decoration of the crowning frieze, which consists of a great variety of motifs with *kīrttimukha* as a central element. In the Nyag Cave Temple each iconographic section of wall-painting has a different uppermost frieze, possibly executed by different artists: masks alternating with textile bands of various colours or lion-faces with long banners held in their jaws and garlands of pearls hung between them (Fig. 20), strings of pearls forming a continuous net. These decorative schemes represent the old tradition of the protective, terrifying pearl-emitting mask. They also echo ritual practices of precious textiles and valances (*dra ba* [*dang*] *dra phyed*) of silk brocade offered to the temple by pious devotees which still form an important aspect of the aesthetic space of Tibetan temples. In general, the ornaments and figurative elements on the ceiling of this phase (11th–13th centuries) represent 'lower spirits' of nature, mythical animals and hybrid creatures (such as *kinnara* and griffins [*vyāla*]) together with airborne deities, as well as symbols associated with wealth and abundance (such as vases of plenty filled with flowers, celestial bejewelled trees, lotus rosettes and cornucopia emitting jewels) from various Indian religious traditions integrated into the Buddhist mythology from very early on. These themes form an important conceptual element in Indian architecture. They are represented on pillars, thrones, portals and *toraṇa* (gates), marking and protecting the sacred sphere of deities.

The images of protective deities at Khartse are remarkable as they represent the only hitherto known painted programme in this artistic period featuring a specific class of protectors and occupying almost the whole entrance wall of a sanctuary. At Khartse this iconographic ensemble is subordinate to monumental gate-protectors, whereas in later temples belonging to the same cultural context many of these deities are depicted residing in the outermost circle of mandala palaces of the Yoga Tantra class – the earliest example being the Translator's Temple (Lo tsa ba lha khang) of Nako (see Luczanits 2008), probably attributable to the first decades of the 12th century. Thus the scheme at Khartse represents a distinctive phase in the development of spiritual programmes in early Western Himalayan Buddhist temples. The configuration provides an excellent resource for the study of the

integration of Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious entities in the early phase of this cultural and artistic period and of the underlying religious concept as well as the function of this group of spirits within the overall programme of the temple.[13]

A unique depiction of a veneration of the Buddha at Khartse

A striking monumental composition on the north wall featuring a teaching Buddha Śākyamuni in the centre (performing a variation of the *vitarkamudrā*) (Fig. 20) may yield important clues to the belief system of that time. He is seated on a lotus throne (*padmāsana*), flanked by a large number of monks in attitudes of veneration. One of the monks is depicted in a prominent position to the left of

20. Large composition featuring a veneration of the Buddha (right-hand section of the north wall)

the central Buddha while laypersons, probably a courtly train, are shown subordinated in the lowest register, in keeping with their position in the spiritual hierarchy. Above Śākyamuni are offering deities in complex postures emanating from clouds.

The large scene can be termed a 'veneration scene', and it is a variation on the theme of the 'sacred assembly', which is a *leitmotif* in this artistic sphere. Therein beings from different temporal levels, the worldly and unearthly sphere, human and enlightened ones are grouped together in a strictly symmetrical composition within a unified space.[14] It appears that a prototype and model of this type of image is the depiction of a historic moment in the life of the Buddha, commonly referred to as 'the first sermon', a theme frequently shown in Ajanta, presenting the preaching Buddha (performing *dharmacakramudrā*) flanked by a community of monks, his first followers.

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[13] While the Khartse images of protectors indicate Indic artistic sources, a different cultural and artistic orientation is reflected in the Tabo Entry Hall, which houses one of the earliest paintings of the 'Later Diffusion of Buddhism' in the region. Dating from the end of 10th century, it depicts an ensemble of protectors who show iconographic affinities with images in the early temples in Central Tibet such as in Zha lu (mid-11th century).

[14] An interesting parallel can be found in a later composition featuring the image of a lama – taking the position of the central Buddha – flanked by monks at Saspol (ca. 13th century); for an image see Genoud 1982: fig. 14.

A key feature at Khartse is that *one* figure in the assembly of monks with strong local Tibetan features is specifically emphasised and seems to appear as a direct witness of Śākyamuni's teaching. The monk is set off within a rectangular framed space and is larger than the other figures. In contrast to the preaching monks in the assembly – who are remarkable for their display of delight at the presence and the word of the Buddha – he holds a miniature stupa or a ritual object such as a bell in his hand, while a larger stupa is positioned in front of him. The latter has exactly the same shape as the built stupa in the village. Does this image commemorate the act of donation of stupas and other religious monuments depicted? It is even not unlikely, as Pritzker (2008: 109) has suggested, that it is Rin chen bzang po[15] who is being portrayed here. However, this specific type of assembly may also echo visionary gatherings such as those described in the Lotus Sutra. Interestingly, a stupa is also held by the Arhat Abheda as a common attribute, alluding to the stupa which the Buddha Śākyamuni gave him when he set off for the northern countries to convert the *yakṣa*, or nature spirits, reflecting the wish for continuity of the teaching.[16] Further research with regard to textual sources and comparable visual depictions will be necessary.

Focusing on the visual material of lay imagery, the courtly riders on elephants with their mahouts and horsemen in the lowest register of the composition, as well as their costumes, textiles and regalia provide an enormously rich resource, especially for studies of material culture, chivalric tradition and the culture of status. The courtly train possibly echoes the courtly pride of aristocracy in north-west India. Comparable characteristics are to be found in the frieze featuring the life of the Buddha at Tabo. Representations of elephants with riders were a common motif in Indian art representing high ranking or princely devotees who have come to worship the Buddha.

21. 'Gate-protector', mandala, north wall

The interpretation of the form, function and meaning of this painting is as yet only in its infancy. It is certainly significant not only for the ongoing reconstruction of the development of early Buddhist art and political theology in the region, but possibly also indicative for the Buddhist art of that time which has been lost in India proper.

Early mandala configurations

On the north wall, to the left of the veneration scene, is the representation of a Vajradhātu mandala (a detail is shown in Fig. 21), while on the south wall are depicted five main deities against a blue background with attending figures arranged around them forming a Dharmadhātuvāgīśvaramañjuśrī mandala (Figs. 22 and 23), with Mañjuśrī at the centre and the four Jinas subordinated (cf. Pritzker 2008). The latter configuration is distributed over two walls with a smaller section of it represented on the entrance wall. These deities are organised in a horizontal succession comparable

[15] Considering the tentative dating of the temple to the mid-11th century and the dates of *lo chen* Rin chen bzang po (958–1055) it is possible that the translator may have been alive at the time when this temple was decorated. It is also possible that the depiction commemorates another spiritual master active in this region or a historical personage from the past. Interestingly, Atiśa is represented with a stupa as his attribute in later depictions, and a ritual stupa with a silver umbrella featured among his personal belongings.

[16] For an image see Linrothe 2004: fig. 13, p. 67. Cf. also the Gra / Grwa thang assembly featuring bodhisattvas in the lowest register with stupas forming a tree-shape configuration in the centre (see Henss 1997: 166).

22. Dharmadhātuvāgīśvaramañjuśrī mandala, south wall

23. Detail of a female deity, south wall

to Mang nang and the Tabo Main Temple (Renovation Phase, mid-11th century), suggesting that Nyag Cave Temple images date to the mid-11th century. This horizontal execution of the programme contrasts with the composition of deities in a geometric mandala palace – corresponding to a tendency towards vertical hierarchy in the symbolism of the spatial iconography (also reflected in architecture) of later periods – which can likewise be found in the ca. mid-12th century Dung dkar caves. The iconographic features of the types of mandala depicted in the Nyag Cave Temple have already been discussed by a number of authors (cf. Pritzker 2008). We will therefore concentrate here on the stylistic attribution, chronology and some hitherto little discussed features.

Stylistic plurality and conceptual unity

The figurative style – representing a Kashmir-inspired stylistic idiom – and colour scheme recalls the art of Tabo from the 11th century. Comparisons between offering deities at Tabo and female deities on the south wall of the Nyag Cave Temple at Khartse show strong affinities. The figurative type at Khartse is rather squat, with a strong upper torso, broad face and slim waist. A characteristic feature here is the powerful, naturalistic movement in the Kashmiri style, with the complex torsion of the body intended to emphasize their divine faculties. In general, the paintings of the north wall lack the elaborate technical achievement of those in the Assembly Hall (*'du khang*) of Tabo in terms of the use of expensive pigments in the latter. However, the image of a 'gate-protector' (Fig. 21) (in later – c. early 12th century – mandala configurations depicted at the entrance portal of a mandala) on the north wall is exemplary for its virtuoso drawing with economic use of elegant red lines,

displaying graphic rather than painterly characteristics and suggesting an experienced painter. On the south wall (Figs. 22 and 23), additional subtle shading along the contours enhances the plasticity of the figure. It is thus possible that the paintings on the north wall remained unfinished. [17]

Looking at the different iconographic themes in this temple, the variety of stylistic modes is striking, even within a single composition. Exemplary for this variety is the 'veneration scene' on the north wall. Here the elaborate courtly scenes show a striking complexity with regard to the representations of animals and details of material culture. They are likely to be the products of artists familiar with painting traditions in the north-west Indian and Kashmiri cultural sphere. By contrast, the monks with characteristic Tibetan features display a different, rather simple local idiom. It is possible that artists from different artistic traditions worked on the decoration within a restricted period of time, or that the different styles or levels of sophistication is the result of collaboration between a master-artist and a pupil. The question of workshops and itinerant artists still needs to be examined in detail. Thus, the originality and the independent character of the decorative programme in this temple lies in the cooperation of artists blending visual vocabulary from different cultural and artistic backgrounds, and Tibetan designers of a spiritual concept under the guidance of a Tibetan scholar 'mastermind', resulting in a unique Western Tibetan *Bildfindung* or pictorial invention. The transfer of older religious and visual heritage from north-west India and Kashmir also generates a linkage to centres famous for their religious traditions.

We may assume that the now ruined monumental temple fulfilled an important public function while the cave sanctuary appears to have been designed mainly for more private use, resulting in a completely different spiritual programme and thus ritual function. The Nyag Cave Temple is important as the only known early cave temple and is thus significant for the study of the different functions of sanctuaries during this artistic phase. The question of donorship, the spiritual concepts and religious practice associated with cave sanctuaries and private chapels in general, in contrast to temples used for official ceremonies will constitute an important issue for future research.

Bar rdzong Cave Temple (Bar rdzong 'gog po'i lha khang)

A view of the south-facing cliff illustrates the dramatic position of the Bar rdzong cave complex (Fig. 24) in the upper southern part of the valley. The Bar rdzong sanctuary is situated at the highest point of a complex of about 30 caves which seem to have served mainly for living and storage purposes. The unremarkable entrance leads to an internal shaft, which once contained steps. Simple small spaces carved into the cliff function as courtyards and admit light into the sanctuaries lying protected behind them. The measurements of the main religious space are c. 3 m by 3 m with the unpainted ceiling at a height of about 2 m (cf. Pritzker 2000). The paintings on the walls are well-preserved, but the sculptures of the main deities have been destroyed. Within the elaborately executed wall-paintings a rather restricted palette of red, blue, white and brown predominates. At the back/main wall an empty space for the central icon flanked by religious hierarchs can be seen (Fig. 26), while on the left- and right-hand walls there are mandalas and large images of Eight Medicine Buddhas flanked by additional deities,

[17] A constant feature in this artistic phase between the 10th and 13th century in the Western Himalayas is the great interest in material culture, luxury art and fabrics and their precise execution, as exemplified in the costumes and thrones of precious textiles. Most of the thrones of textiles at Khartse are decorated with small-scale patterns in characteristic colours; similar designs can also be found in the Tabo ambulatory (see Klimburg-Salter 1997: Fig. 169). These textiles mark and embellish sacred space and they have a comparable function to that of lotus seats and different animals as mounts or vehicles of the deities.

24. Cliff with the Bar rdzong cave complex

including Ṣaḍakṣarī-Lokeśvara and Tārā. The interior decoration indicates strong links with new religious concepts of Tibetan Buddhist schools in Central Tibet. The latter, such as the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud pa (pr. Drigung Kagyüpa) appeared in Western Tibet from the 13th century onwards. In these religious traditions the teacher, or hierarch of the individual order, and his idealized portrait surrounded by monks of his school plays a central role. Such images are accompanied by specific iconographic programmes and deities associated with their belief systems. Most of the paintings of the deities in the sanctuary are accompanied by brief inscriptions and captions.

25. Detail of *dikpāla* in the lowest frieze: Kubera (Lus ngan po) and Īśāna (dBang ldan)

Significant artistic features of the paintings in the Bar rdzong cave, in contrast to the earlier paintings of the Khartse Nyag Cave Temple, include compositional units recalling thangka depictions. They are characterised by a complex and strictly hierarchic layout of a main icon with smaller attendant figures turned towards the main deity, often the hierarch of the school, which reflects a distinctive phase of religious concepts. Among the key features of this trend is the representation of the spiritual lineage and in particular the Eight Great Siddhas – Buddhist

26. Main wall, central icon flanked by four eminent teachers

27. Ṣaḍakṣarī-Lokeśvara (east wall)

adepts who have attained perfection – positioned at the sides of the paintings, while protector deities are usually positioned in the lowest zone. This type of strict hierarchic composition became a dominant convention of Tibetan painting in later periods.

Unfortunately, the sculpture on the main (north) wall has been destroyed (Fig. 26). A stepped base in clay and a carefully depicted throne back (*toraṇa, rta babs*) remain. The latter features elaborate architectonic elements suggesting both a two-dimensional hieratic throne frame and an illusionist three-dimensional sacred space in which various mythical creatures dwell. They probably symbolize the different elements of the cosmos. In the outer registers one finds four historical figures representing eminent masters. Beneath two of them are inscriptions paying homage to them (albeit without giving their names): the figure on the upper left-hand side is most probably Atiśa (with a dark complexion) – together with the Great Translator Rin chen bzang po depicted below. Atiśa, who was one of the foremost scholars of the Vikramaśīla monastery in the heartland of the Indian Pāla kingdom, arrived in Western Tibet in 1042 on the invitation of Byang chub 'od, who is perhaps portrayed on the right-hand side, below the image of (probably) Ye shes 'od (pr. Yeshe Ö). Both religious figures on the right-hand side display the *dharmacakramudrā* (Teaching Gesture) and they are flanked by *nāga* depicted on both sides of the throne base. They are turned towards the main deity and accompanied by rows of small images of the lineage, including *siddha* organised in bands. Moreover, the Seven Jewels of the Cakravartin (*rgyal srid sna bdun*) appear in the lowest zone, each with corresponding captions.

The flanking walls, orientated towards the east and west, represent symmetrical compositions, comprising on each side a mandala, two groups of four Buddhas representing a set of eight, and two bodhisattvas. On the west wall (Fig. 28) one can see Vasudhārā and Nāgeśvararāja (Klu dbang gi rgyal po) on the left-hand side. Moving towards the main icon (south wall) we find four Buddhas all seated on lions as vehicles forming a set of Medicine Buddhas[18] together with a mandala of the Tathāgatas (De bzhin gshegs pa) around a central Vairocana. In the interstices of the mandala palace there are elaborately rendered vases and scrolls from which the deities of the mandala emanate. In the bottom zone there is a frieze of 11 gods (for a detail see also Fig. 25) who include the guardians of the four quarters of space (*dikpāla*). On the east wall – as a counterpart to Vasudhārā on the west wall – is Ṣaḍakṣarī-Lokeśvara (the inscription indicates sPyan ras gzigs dbang phyug) and below this the image of Tārā. Lokeśvara is holding a lotus and a *mālā* symbolizing infinite love and compassion (Fig. 27). He is enthroned on a double circle of lotus leaves and is flanked by his two consorts, Mandhidhara and the female goddess Mahāvidyā. A characteristic feature is the stylised landscape behind the five-lobed arch of the throne alluding to the Potalaka Mountain where Avalokiteśvara

[18] On the east wall Bhaiṣajyaguru (Sangs rgyas sman bla) is depicted on the left-hand side (lower register) holding a begging bowl filled with nectar.

28. Iconographic configuration on the west wall showing (from left to right): Vasudhārā (in the upper register), Nāgeśvararāja (below), Medicine Buddhas, mandalas and *dikpāla* in the lowest frieze

resides (Bröskamp 2006: 265). However, crystalline rocks and sacred trees defining divine abodes are a common and typical feature of Central Tibetan art from very early on.

In the lower register of this section one sees a female bodhisattva, identifiable as Green Tārā (Śyāmatārā, sGrol ma ljang gu), performing the *varadamudrā* (*mchog sbyin phyag rgya*) and holding two lotus flowers. Above the deity are (most likely) the portraits of Atiśa (who is believed to have introduced her cult to Tibet) and 'Brom ston (pr. Dromtön), his foremost disciple, who then became the main lineage holder of the bKa' gdams pa (pr. Kadampa) order.[19]

In the lowest zone are *siddha* (*grub thob*), i.e., Indian masters who have attained perfection on the path towards ultimate liberation and practised teachings outside the monastery, typically wearing simple skirts and ornaments such as chains and crowns made of bone, with their long hair tied in a knob in ascetic fashion.

As far as stylistic attribution is concerned, the overall iconographic programme, motifs (elaborate thrones, delicate details of costumes and ornament) and the 'body-less' figurative style display significant distinctive features indicating the influence of Central Tibet in the region. This appears to have first been related to the arrival of monks in Western Tibet belonging to the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud pa School in the early 13th century who were soon followed by members of other schools. Characteristic of the distinctive Tibetan stylistic idiom associated with these orders are strong Indo-Nepalese artistic affinities – ultimately deriving from Pāla art in India – observable in different artistic media.[20] The

[19] This configuration of teachers above a Green Tārā can probably also be found in the famous 11th/12th-century thangka of Tārā in the Ford Collection suggesting a bKa' gdams pa affiliation.

[20] For a 13th-century Tibetan book-cover reflecting this style see Rhie and Thurman 1981: fig. 122. Concrete evidence of the movement of styles from India and Nepal to Tibet is provided by the presence of Newari artists as documented in the 13th and 14th centuries, when abbots from the Sa skya pa (pr. Sakyapa) School commissioned paintings for their temples (cf. Lo Bue 2006: 95).

Khartse paintings share these compositional and artistic characteristics with the 13^{th}/14^{th}-century Alchi Lhakhang Soma,[21] although the latter represents a rather local style, while the style at Khartse displays a remarkably high level of technical and artistic accomplishment. They would also seem to be related to the paintings at Wanla (Luczanits 2006: Fig. 8). Due to stylistic affinities with Central Tibetan thangkas dated to the first half of the 13^{th} century in the Potala (Exhibition Catalogue 2006: fig. p. 264), it would seem plausible to date the Bar rdzong cave paintings to the 13^{th} century.

mKhar rdzong Cave Temple (mKhar rdzong lha khang)

This cave, too, is possibly the only sanctuary within a large complex of caves (c. 30–40, each measuring c. 2 m x 3 m). Its name is derived from the castle whose remains have survived at the top of the cliff. While the religious programme with an emphasis on portraits of the teachers is comparable with that of the previously discussed cave, stylistic characteristics point to a later, 14^{th}/15^{th}-century date. Facing south, the cave is located fairly high up, at about 200 m from the bottom of the cliff, and is accessible through stairways cut into the rocks forming internal shafts. A courtyard is located in front of the main sanctuary. The cave is unique as it preserves a programme with the ceiling decorations intact. In contrast to the subdued colours and restricted palette in the earlier Bar rdzong cave temple, here intensive colours predominate, with generous use of dark red, dark blue pigments as well as gold (Figs. 29 and 30).

29. Portrait of Zhi ba 'od in mKhar rdzong Cave (main/north wall)

30. Detail of the *toraṇa* (*kīrttimukha*) above teacher

31. Fragments of manuscripts found in the cave

Two symmetrically arranged throne bases are positioned in the rather large sacred dwelling. They probably once formed the support for monumental statues of the main icons of the temple. Fragments of these statues as well as other invaluable artefacts such as manuscripts (Fig. 31), paintings on cloth (probably rare painted ceiling textiles featuring offering deities), and votive offerings of clay such as *tsha tsha* and metal objects which were used as decorative elements in the temple, are scattered around in the sanctuaries and in the whole complex. They are in urgent need of documentation and preservation. A full description of the styles and iconography of the overall programme in the temple would go beyond the scope of the present paper. Likewise, the function and chronology of the complex have yet to be studied. Here we will concentrate on specific features.

The northern wall displays a double portrait of the noble image of Bu ston Rin chen grub (pr. Butön Rinchendrup) (Fig. 32), who lived between 1290 and 1263 and was an abbot of Shalu (Zha lu) monastery in Central Tibet. He is shown giving dharma-instructions (indicating his importance as a teacher) and holding the stems of two lotus flowers on which rest a *vajra* (*rdo rje*) and a bell (*ghaṇṭā*) as attributes. He wears the characteristic red hat and

[21] For images see Genoud 1982: figs. 14ff.

32. Double portrait of a religious master (Bu ston Rin chen grub?), north wall

sumptuous robe of a lama. Two green haloes shine behind him, and it seems that the surrounding natural world, translated into ornament, has burst into bloom at the presence of the religious dignitaries and their teaching.

In the centre above the main images is a medallion with a visionary manifestation of the Dharmakāya-Buddha or Ādibuddha Vajradhara (rDo rje ’chang) – celestial progenitor of the Sa skya pa order – seated on a lotus and flanked by offering deities. His complexion is blue and he is embellished with the ornaments of a bodhisattva, with hands crossed before his breast holding two *vajra* as a key element. The deity is surrounded by a field of lotus flowers and is encircled by a rainbow.

In the interstices in the upper zone and between the mandalas are the portraits of eminent teachers identified by captions (from left to right): Byang chub ’od (designated as *pho rang* [*sic*!] *btsun pa* in the inscription), *lo chen* Rin chen bzang po shown in teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*), *lha bla ma* Ye shes ’od, and *lha rje bla ma* Zhi ba ’od (Fig. 29).

On the western and eastern walls (Fig. 33), in mirror-like symmetry, one can see *mahāsiddha* (*grub thob chen po*), Tibetan teachers (Sa skya pa and ’Bri gung pa in the uppermost rows together with the lineage, which include Indian masters; below them are five mandalas in a row.

On the entrance wall (southern wall) there are wrathful protectors (Fig. 34): in the upper left-hand corner resides Mahākāla, performing a dynamic side step. He holds a *kapāla* and chopper in his hands before his breast. Below him is represented the *lokapāla* Vaiśravaṇa (rNam thos sras), the Guardian of the North and protector of wealth and treasures. To his right is Yama and different

33. Row of five mandalas, west wall

34. Mahākāla, south wall

forms of Mahākāla. Depicted above the portal are further protective deities (*srung ma*). In the lower corner we can also see figures of donors with lotus flowers as offerings, possibly commemorating the act of consecration.

The ceiling displays a distinct composition showing a mandalic layout and a lotus medallion in the centre containing letters in the Lantsa script as characteristic features (Fig. 35); moving around the temple one finds panels with various mythical birds, dragons and phoenixes combining Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist cosmologic symbolism with clouds in the corners. The origins of dragon and phoenix lie in ancient Chinese astrologic and geomantic traditions and are equated with the celestial directions. These panels are shown in alternation with textile patterns and images of the Eight Auspicious Signs (*bkra shis rtags brgyad*). This interest in textiles covering the ceiling alludes to an honorific cover[22] which is consistently present in the early phase of Buddhist temples in the region from the 10th century onwards. In the mKhar rdzong cave, the idea of patterns and compositional units, which mimic different types of actual temple hangings and textiles such as damasks and embroidered silks, is particularly dominant.[23] Interesting comparative material is provided by ritual clothes of the important silk-producing centres of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) which had close contacts with Tibet in the 14th century. A more detailed study of the textile models and their symbolism can thus yield not only important clues for the study of trade relations but also for the wider cultural and artistic nexus as well as for the question of the temple's dating. A characteristic feature of later periods is the conscious and creative adoption and paraphrasing of the visual vocabulary – and in particular ornament – of the early Buddhist phase in this region. An interesting feature unknown in earlier phases is a medallion at the centre of the ceiling, surrounded by lotus

35. Ceiling, central panel showing a flower rosette containing the Avalokiteśvara mantra *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ hrīḥ*

[22] This was first proposed by Klimburg-Salter for Tabo (1997: 173ff), following earlier interpretations of the ceilings at Dunhuang by Whitfield and Farrer (1990).

[23] By contrast, in earlier (10th to 13th c.) temples many motifs depicted on ceilings are also found in other media such as wall painting as well as in the frames of bronzes and wooden portals originating from same artistic sphere.

tendrils and forming a six-petalled flower containing letters in the Lantsa script. The composition represents the Avalokiteśvara mantra *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ hrīḥ*. The mantra begins with the letter in the petal on the upper left side of the flower rosette and ends with the syllable 'hrīḥ' in the centre. A personification of this mantra, which is among the most important Buddhist mantras, is Ṣaḍakṣarī-Lokeśvara, who is depicted in the wall-paintings of the Bar rdzong cave, as mentioned above.

As far as artistic attribution is concerned, the decorative programme of the mKhar rdzong cave represents a tradition which is among the most refined and technically sophisticated artistic expressions of Western Tibetan Buddhist art, displaying a remarkable virtuosity in the variation of themes and motifs. Many elements echo earlier styles associated with the kingdom of Purang Guge, e.g., the costumes of the deities and donors, the great interest in ornamental detail and the lavish use of gold. This style and the high quality of execution have affinities with the 'renaissance phase' of temples at Tholing and Tabo (one example is the Golden Temple [gSer khang]), datable to the 15th century. For this high level of stylistic and technical sophistication remarkable financial resources must have been available. With regard to the dating of the mKhar rdzong cave paintings, it can be assumed that they date to the 14th/ 15th century, based on the lineage depiction of Sa skya pa (on the eastern) and 'Bri gung pa on the northern wall. Stylistic affinities with Central Tibetan thangkas and with Yuan-style ornamental types and textile designs of this period also support this dating.[24]

Brag rdzong Cave Temple (Brag rdzong lha khang)

Another cave complex, located to the north-west of Old Khartse Village, houses the so-called Brag rdzong Cave Temple, which also faces south (Fig. 36). The layout of the cave shows a courtyard and an adjoining main hall. The measurements of the latter are 4.8 m on the east-west side and 2.66 m in north-south side. The height of the hall is 2.28 m (in the corners 2.24 m). The entrance wall has two portals, giving access to a rectangular room. When entering the cave, one sees the longer northern wall of the sanctuary. The right side (eastern wall) is dominated by images of religious dignitaries (Fig. 37). The central image portrays the master (maybe Bu ston) while teaching, but there are no attributes to identify him. To his left is (possibly) Nāgārjuna (Klu sgrub) with an aureola of *nāga* rising behind his head as his characteristic feature; above this are images of the lineage, with debating teachers below. There is no inscription and

36. Brag rdzong cave complex

[24] Cf. a Sa skya pa lineage thangka from Central Tibet (Fisher 1997: fig. 147) and a Western Tibetan thangka (15th century) for a comparable compositional type of a triad of figures in the centre (*ibid.*: fig. 151).

37. Portraits of religious masters, east wall

38. Eight Medizine Buddhas as main icons of the north wall

39. Detail of the uppermost row: different forms of Hevajra

40. Configuration on the left-hand side of the entrance wall with figures of group of 16 Arhats, below 7 Buddhas and 5 Tathāgatas and local deities above the right door

neither are there any images of dGe lugs pa monks; but in the lowest line we find masters with hats indicating a 'Bri gung pa lineage. The colours red and black predominate in the colour scheme, with additional use of gold for the skin of the teacher. In general the figurative style is rather schematic and stereotyped as compared to the visually and technically complex artistic idiom discussed above, but the line drawing is dynamic and sophisticated and can be ascribed to a skilled master.

On the northern (main) wall we find the following programme: the uppermost row represents bodhisattvas and below them are shown 35 enthroned Buddhas (lTung bshags kyi sangs rgyas so lnga) reflecting different aspects of Śākyamuni, who is represented at their centre, while the Eight Medicine Buddhas constitute the main icons (Fig. 38).

A detail in the uppermost row shows complex figures representing different forms of Hevajra (Kye rDo rje) (Fig. 39), whose cult is believed to have been transferred to Tibet by the Indian *mahāsiddha* Virūpa. On the left side is a figure representing Kapāladhara Hevajra wearing a skull crown and holding skull bowls in his eight pairs of hands. He is shown in *yab yum* with his partner Nairātmā (who is without 'self') representing the highest wisdom. The *yi dam* (*iṣṭadevatā*) Hevajra is – together with *ḍākinī* (represented here in the left-hand female deity) – of central importance in Tantric Buddhism as a deity in rituals of initiation.

On the entrance wall, the uppermost row features Sixteen Arhats flanking the Buddha, while below is a set of Seven Buddhas, and in the lowest row Five Tathāgatas in their respective colours (Fig. 40). Above the door one finds depictions of protectors and female and male local deities mounted on horses, headed by a horseman in an aristocratic robe

with a dog, possibly representing a form of the tutelary deity Pe har. The mounted hero – originally of Iranian/Central Asian origin and later appointed as protector of Samye (bSam yas) – seems to have played an important role as a protector of Western Tibetan temples from the late 12th century onwards.[25] Above this are different variants of wrathful protectors such as Mahākāla and Acala (with sword). In the lowest zone one can see donor depictions and the symbols of the Seven Jewels of the Universal Monarch (*cakravartin*).

lCang lo can Cave (lCang lo can phug pa)

To the north of Old Khartse village is a cave sanctuary which the mKhar rtse people refer to as lCang lo can cave (Fig. 41). A river meandering through the valley below is the lifeline which irrigates a small forest. Above is the south-facing cave lying hidden behind the ruins of the monastery. Unfortunately the small cave is in a poor state of preservation. Acts of vandalism in the past focused mainly on defacing the eyes and mouths of the deities. This also affected the protectors, who are positioned – in keeping with their tutelary role – on the south (entrance) wall with captions indicating their identity. The east wall is covered with a depiction of rNam thos sras (Vaiśravaṇa) in his palace with attendants. On the west wall is a mandala (Fig. 42) displaying in its upper left-hand corner a portrait of the important religious master Tsong kha pa (*rje* Tsong kha pa chen po according to the caption), who lived from 1357–1419 and was the founder of the dGe lugs pa School, the diffusion of which to Western Tibet started in the third decade of the 15th century. In the upper right-hand corner is a painting of *lo chen* Rin (chen) bzang (po). A mandala on the north wall features Hevajra as the central deity. It is flanked by depictions of Nāgārjuna (caption: Klu sgrub) and the *siddha* Lūyipa (caption: Lū i pa). In the upper right-hand corner there is also a composition with eminent religious persons from previous periods in the region, among them *pho ran* [*sic*!] *btsun pa* Byang chub ’od, *byang chub sems dpa’ bla ma* Ye shes ’od and *lha rje bla ma* Zhi ba ’od, as they are named in the captions below their portraits. The depiction in the lower right-hand interstice

41. View of the Cang lo can (pr. Jang Lojen) caves and the castle above

42. Mandala on the west wall

[25] According to new research the ‘career’ of Pe har in the Western Himalaya and Western Tibet can be associated with the famous ’Bro clan (Papa-Kalantari in press).

43. Ceiling detail: Avalokiteśvara mantra *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ hrīḥ* in the centre framed by textile patterns and valances

between the central mandala and flanking deities on the same wall is probably a portrait of the donors.

The ceiling composition is comparable to the mKhar rdzong central panel (Figs. 43). The composition of the Avalokiteśvara mantra *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ hrīḥ* is an important component of the overall programme of the temple which may reflect ritual practices of meditation and recitation performed by the Buddhist devotee in the temple. The holy letters or 'vocal sounds' in this cave are 'enthroned' like deities on bases shaped like clouds from which scrolls, peonies and lotus blossoms emanate. These medallions cover the whole ceiling. In the corners are depictions of textile ornaments, while the uppermost border of the ceiling is decorated with a textile valance, alluding to a virtual sacred space defined and embellished by precious textiles and honorific covers.[26] The ornaments, figurative motifs and textile paintings on the ceilings have an important role to play in the symbolism of Buddhist sacred spaces in the Western Himalaya and Western Tibet. They also provide a hugely rich resource for cultural studies, especially for issues of material culture, trade relations and cultural interactions at different chronological phases.

Perspectives for future research

As this brief survey of selected recent findings has demonstrated, the Khartse Valley remains an extraordinary cultural landscape where a large number of outstanding Buddhist monuments and cultural traditions from various periods (dating to between the 11th to 19th centuries) have been preserved.

It is also important to point out the unique variety of architectonic types of sacred spaces in the region – a large temple, cave sanctuaries and stupas – and the 'original' layout which they still display. Of singular importance are the discoveries of large cave complexes and cave sanctuaries, in particular of the Nyag Cave Temple. These cave temples constituted a type of religious architecture which seems to have assumed a special role in Western Tibet. The monumentality of the temple evidently stands in sharp contrast to the modest size of the cave sanctuary. The remarkable size of the temple indicates the importance of Khartse as a religious and economic centre, while the cave sanctuary exemplifies the different functions of the sacred spaces in the region. While the temple seems to fulfil official purposes of religious devotion, designed to accommodate a community of monks and worshippers, the function of the cave may rather meet the needs of private donorship.

The density and richness of the artistic remains attest to a large cultural nexus and a complex economic infrastructure allowing the establishment of a very important religious centre in this high-altitude region and the commissioning of works of art of highest artistic and technical achievement.

[26] Elements of material culture translated into the medium of painting also indicate that it is through offerings and liturgic paraphernalia in rituals as well as sensual interaction with the holy image (*sku rten*) from the part of the Buddhist devotee with objects such as precious silks that the majesty of the Buddha and his teaching unfold their full significance.

The underlying patterns of trade and cultural interactions have still to be reconstructed. Future studies will certainly include the question of the socio-economic organisation and the political and religious conditions in particular with regard to the role of local aristocratic lineages, such as that of the Khartse king and other patrons and religious personalities as well as that of the social organisation of the local people of the Khartse valley.

The documentation so far achieved already offers sufficient material for an interdisciplinary analysis of the development of the artistic Buddhist culture and its socio-political framework. Depictions of key political and religious figures which have survived in various caves dating from different periods in the area, in combination with inscriptional evidence, provide a rich basis for in-depth studies of contemporary concepts and models of political sovereignty and religious culture. The temples and their interior decoration offer excellent new material of the highest artistic workmanship for comparative studies with monuments of Central Tibet and Central Asia as well as for the definition of the evolutionary history of the Buddhist art and culture of Western Himalayas (in particular Ladakh, Zangskar, Spiti and Upper Kinnaur).

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